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## The conversation we need to have about carbon

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### Abstract

Recent conversations about carbon pricing are still framed within gentle themes of continuing growth and well-being, where no one has to pay more for anything without being compensated. The words that need to be in our conversations are transformation, rationing and shared sacrifice.

### Keywords

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# THE CONVERSATION

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Emergency management would be severely stretched under future conditions: we need a serious conversation now.

Alexander Kesselaar

Recent conversations about carbon pricing are still framed within gentle themes of continuing growth and well-being, where no one has to pay more for anything without being compensated. The words that need to be in our conversations are transformation, rationing and shared sacrifice.

Australian political leaders dance around the hard issues of climate change. There are no prizes for national leaders who bring bad news. The diabolical difficulty of turning around a fossil-fuel economy has contributed to five of them (Howard, Nelson, Turnbull, Rudd, Gillard) losing their jobs.

But there is no easy way to do this. The evidence is mounting that we are well past the point where climate change response can be a planned, gradual transition. It is much more likely that profound and unwanted change in the next few years will make a mockery of current policies on climate change and other issues (productivity, health, education).

It is time for both leaders and citizens to stop pretending that we can make the necessary changes without pain – for businesses, for households, for the economy. Yes it will cost jobs, but there will be a need for many different kinds of labour. We will have to do things for ourselves that fossil fuels have been doing for us. Yes it will cost money - it is the price to be paid for the free ecological ride we have been getting for several centuries. The changes needed are huge, and many of them will be forced on us before we are ready.

According to a recent report from Carbon Tracker and LSE, we need to keep 60-80% of the fossil fuel reserves already listed on world stock exchanges in the ground to have a chance of avoiding global warming of 2 degrees Celsius. Pricing in the risk to current investments of these “stranded assets” (coal, oil and gas) would lead to a new financial crisis. The report

shows Australia as one of the world's 12 most exposed stock exchanges, mainly due to our dependence on coal.

Put another way, we need to decarbonise at the rate of 9-10% per year for at least a decade to avoid 2 degrees of warming, compared with targets of a 5% lowering of 2000 levels by 2020 under current Government and Coalition commitments. There is no historical analogy for how to do this; the 2008 Global Financial Crisis led to only a 1.4% decrease, which was quickly reversed. Innovative ideas are needed.

And if you think keeping coal in the ground is not going to happen and business-as-usual is more likely, remember, many scholars think it is already too late to avoid 2 degrees of warming, due to the lag effects of emissions already in the atmosphere. Then we are on track for 4-6 degrees of warming with an increase in extreme events and fundamental changes in underlying conditions. (No it doesn't sound much, but that's the temperature difference between now and the last ice age, in the opposite direction.)

Either way neither the economy nor society will be able to operate as they do now.

Even adaptation research – long the poor cousin in climate change research because it was seen as giving up on mitigation - is evolving rapidly from a gradualist to a transformative framing. If climate change is incremental, many of Australia's existing mechanisms are well placed to deal with the consequences of increasingly severe fires, floods and cyclones. We have good civil institutions of emergency management and a strong volunteer culture.

But these would be impossibly stretched under scenarios of sudden transitions and more extreme change. Many researchers are now pointing to the need for more “transformational adaptation”. In its submission to the recent Productivity Commission Inquiry into Barriers to Climate Change Adaptation, CSIRO gave examples of how it would be necessary to change governance under a 4 degree warmer world:

*Significant changes to social policy to manage changing expectations of living standards and way of life.*

*Alternative governance arrangements in place as local governments become increasingly unable to cope, particularly in coastal areas.*

Australia needs a much more honest conversation about what that pain is going to feel like for different groups in society (including those who will seek to come to our shores), how to share the necessary sacrifices with some semblance of justice and what our society might look like as it goes through a generation or two of transition. One word we'll need to resurrect is rationing – we've shown we're good at it during drought. People accepted limited water rationing if it was fairly applied and seen to be enforced. Can we start to imagine how society might operate once electricity and petrol need to be rationed?

The leaders for this conversation will be those who can strengthen the social contract between diverse parts of society, encouraging us all to tackle problems together and strengthen networks of support during times of rapid change.